

# THE ROMANOV REGICIDE



Testimony of of the Commandant of the  
“House of Special Purpose” in Ekaterinburg,  
Iakov M. Iurovsky

EDITED BY TIM DAVENPORT



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**The Romanov Regicide:**  
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**“House of Special Purpose”<sup>1</sup> in Ekaterinburg,**  
**Iakov M. Iurovsky<sup>2</sup>**  
**[1920]**

On July 16 [1918], a telegram in code was received from Perm containing an order regarding extermination [*istreblennii*] of the Romanovs on the 16th at 6:00 p.m. Filipp Goloshchekin ordered the execution of the directive. A vehicle was scheduled to arrive at midnight to transport the bodies.

At 6:00 p.m., the boy Sednev (a kitchen helper) was taken away, which greatly alarmed the Romanovs and their entourage. Dr. Botkin<sup>3</sup> came to ask the reason for this. It was explained that the boy's uncle, who had been arrested, escaped, and had now returned, wished to see his nephew. The next day, the boy was sent back to his home region (apparently to Tula Province).

The truck did not arrive at midnight; it only showed up at 1:30 a.m. This delayed the carrying out of the order. In the meantime, all preparations had been made: 12 men (including 7 Latvians<sup>4</sup>) armed with Nagant revolvers were selected to carry out the sentence. Two of the Latvians refused to shoot the young women.

When the vehicle arrived, everyone was asleep. Botkin was woken up, and he, in turn, woke the others. The explanation given

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<sup>1</sup> The so-called “House of Special Purpose” was a large house commandeered by the Ekaterinburg Bolsheviks from a retired businessman in May 1918. A fence was built around the house to prevent communication with the outside world and its windows were painted over. —*T.D.*

<sup>2</sup> Iakov Iurovsky (1878–1938) was a top official of the regional Cheka. He would die by the sword in the secret police terror of the 1930s. —*T.D.*

<sup>3</sup> Evgeny Botkin (1865–1918) was the personal physician of Tsar Nikolai II and his family. As the Tsarevich Alexei (1904–1918) suffered from hemophilia, the doctor was a constant fixture in the royal entourage. —*T.D.*

<sup>4</sup> Latvians were regarded as particularly fierce and dedicated revolutionists. —*T.D.*

was: "Due to the unrest in the city, it is necessary to move the Romanov family from the upper floor to the lower floor." It took them half an hour to get dressed. A room on the lower floor was selected, one with a plastered wooden partition (to prevent ricochets); and all the furniture was removed from it. The squad stood ready in the adjoining room. The Romanovs suspected nothing.

The commandant [Iurovsky] went to fetch them personally, by himself, and led them down the stairs to the lower room. [Tsar] Nikolai carried Alexei in his arms, while the others carried small cushions and various personal items. Upon entering the empty room, [Tsarina] Alexandra Feodorovna asked, "Is there not even a chair? Can we not even sit down?"

The commandant ordered two chairs brought in. Nikolai seated Alexei on one, and Alexandra Feodorovna sat on the other. The commandant ordered the others to stand in a row. Once they had taken their places, the squad was summoned. When the squad entered, the commandant told the Romanovs that, since their relatives in Europe were continuing their offensive against Soviet Russia, the Ural Executive Committee had decreed their execution by shooting.

Nikolai turned his back on the squad and faced his family; then, as if suddenly realizing what was happening, he turned to the commandant, asking, "What? What?"

The commandant hurriedly repeated the statement and ordered the squad to prepare. The squad had been instructed beforehand regarding who was to shoot whom and ordered to aim straight for the heart to minimize bloodshed and finish the task quickly.

Nikolai said nothing more and turned back to his family; the others uttered a few incoherent exclamations. The entire exchange lasted only a few seconds. Then the shooting began, continuing for two or three minutes. Nikolai was killed instantly by the commandant himself; Alexandra Feodorovna and the Romanovs' entourage died immediately thereafter. Twelve people were shot in

all: Nicholai, Alexandra Feodorovna, Alexei, the four daughters—Tatiana, Olga, Maria, and Anastasia—Dr. Botkin, the valet Trupp, the cook Tikhomirov, another cook named Kharitonov, and a lady-in-waiting whose name the commandant forgot.

Alexei, three of the sisters, and Botkin were still alive; they had to be finished off with gunfire. This surprised the commandant, as the shots had been aimed directly at the heart; it was also remarkable that the Nagant bullets ricocheted off something and bounced around the room like hail. When an attempt was made to bayonet one of the young women, the bayonet could not pierce her bodice. Because of all this, the entire procedure, including the “check” (feeling for a pulse, etc.), took about twenty minutes. Then they began carrying out the bodies and placing them in a vehicle, covering them with cloth to prevent blood from leaking.

At this point theft broke out, so three reliable comrades had to be stationed to guard the bodies while the transfer continued. The bodies were carried out one by one. Under threat of execution, all the stolen items were returned—a gold watch, a diamond-studded cigarette case, etc.

The commandant was only given the task of carrying out the sentence; the removal of the bodies and related duties fell to Comrade Ermakov, a worker at the Verkh-Isetsy factory, formerly a political prisoner. He was supposed to arrive with a vehicle and was admitted using the agreed-upon password, “chimney sweep” [*trubochist*]. The vehicle’s late arrival made the commandant doubt Ermakov’s punctuality, so he decided to personally oversee the entire operation to the end.

Around three in the morning, they set out for the site Ermakov was supposed to have prepared (behind the Verkh-Isetsy factory). The initial plan was to transport the bodies by vehicle and then switch to horses at a specific point, as the vehicle could go no further. The chosen location was an abandoned mine shaft. About five versts [3 and a quarter miles] past the Verkh-Isetsy factory, they came upon a full group—some 25 people on horseback, in

light carriages, and so on. These were the workers (members of the Soviet, the executive committee, etc.) whom Ermakov had assembled. They immediately shouted, “Why didn’t you bring them to us alive?!” They had thought the execution of the Romanovs would be entrusted to them.

They began transferring the bodies onto light carriages—whereas what were really needed were carts. This proved very awkward. Once again there began a rifling through pockets; it again became necessary to threaten with execution by shooting and to post sentries. It was then discovered that Tatiana, Olga, and Anastasia were wearing special corsets. It was decided to strip the bodies naked, but not there—rather, at the burial site. However, it turned out that no one knew the location of the mine shaft designated for this purpose.

Dawn was breaking. The commandant sent out horsemen to search for the site, but no one found anything. It turned out that nothing at all had been prepared; there were no shovels, etc. As the car became stuck between two trees, it was abandoned, and the party proceeded in horse-drawn carts, the bodies covered by a cloth. They traveled 11 and half versts [7 and a half miles] from Ekaterinburg and stopped one and a half versts [a mile] from the village of Koptiaki; this was between 6 and 7 o’clock in the morning.

In the forest, they found an abandoned mine shaft (where gold had once been mined), about three and a half arshins [8.2 feet] deep. There was an arshin [2.3 feet] of water in the shaft. The commandant ordered the bodies stripped and bonfires lit to burn everything. Horsemen were stationed around the perimeter to turn away any passersby. When they began undressing one of the young women, they saw a corset torn in places by bullets—diamonds were visible through the holes. The men’s eyes clearly lit up with greed. The commandant decided to dismiss the entire work party immediately, leaving only a few horsemen and a five-man squad



on guard duty. The others departed. The squad then proceeded to strip and burn the bodies.

Alexandra Feodorovna was found to be wearing an intact pearl belt, fashioned from several necklaces sewn into a strip of cloth. The diamonds were immediately ripped out. They gathered (speaking of the diamonds) about half a pud [260 troy ounces<sup>5</sup>]. This hoard was buried at the Alapaev factory in a small building beneath the floorboards, and in 1919 was dug up and brought to Moscow.

After gathering all valuables into bags, they burned the remaining items found on the bodies and lowered the corpses into the mine shaft. In the process, some valuables, such as a brooch and Botkin's dentures, were dropped; furthermore, attempts to collapse the shaft using hand grenades evidently damaged the bodies and tore off certain parts—the explanation the commandant offered for the severed finger and similar items later found at the site by the Whites (who subsequently discovered the location). However, there was no intention to leave the Romanovs there; the shaft had been designated from the beginning as merely a temporary burial place.

Having completed the operation and posted a guard, the commandant traveled at 10 or 11 in the morning (the 17th of July) to report to the Ural Executive Committee, where he met with [Georgii] Safarov and [Alexander] Beloborodov. He described what had been found and expressed regret that he had not been permitted to search the Romanovs earlier. From Chutskaev (chairman of the city executive committee), the commandant learned of some very deep, abandoned mine shafts located at the 9th verst [6th mile] of the Moscow highway that were suitable for the burial of the Romanovs.

The commandant set out for the site but did not reach it immediately due to a vehicle breakdown; he had to complete the

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<sup>5</sup> This great quantity seems unlikely. —*T.D.*

journey to the mine shafts on foot. He did find three very deep, water-filled shafts there, where he decided to dispose of the bodies by weighting them with stones. Since watchmen were present—who were inconvenient witnesses—it was decided that a car carrying Chekists would arrive together with the truck transporting the bodies; under the pretext of conducting a search, the Chekists would then arrest everyone on site.

The commandant had to make his way back using a horse-drawn rig he commandeered along the road. Further delays ensued: while riding to the site with one of the Chekists to organize the operation, the commandant fell from his horse and was badly injured (the Chekist subsequently fell as well). As a contingency plan should the mine-shaft scheme fail, it was decided to either burn the bodies or bury them in water-filled clay pits, having first disfigured them beyond recognition with sulfuric acid. Upon finally returning to the city at 8:00 p.m. (on July 17th), they began gathering the necessary supplies—kerosene and sulfuric acid. Horse-drawn carts, unaccompanied by drivers, were requisitioned from the prison. Although they had planned to depart at 11:00 p.m., the incident involving the Chekists caused a delay; they did not set out for the mine, taking ropes to haul up the bodies and so forth, until 12:30 on the night of July 17/18.

To isolate the mine (the first one, a prospector's shaft) for the duration of the operation, it was announced in the village of Koptiaki that Czechs<sup>6</sup> were hiding in the forest and that the woods were to be searched; no one was permitted to leave the village under any pretext. Orders were given to shoot on the spot anyone who breached the security perimeter.

Meanwhile, dawn broke—it was already the third day, the 18th. The idea arose to bury some of the bodies right there by the mine; they began digging a pit and had nearly finished. But then a

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<sup>6</sup> Czech former prisoners of war who rose up against Bolshevik authorities. Military pressure exerted by the Czechs was a key motivation for the Communists taking such hasty and extreme action against the royal family. On July 25, 1918, eight days after the regicides, the Czechs took Ekaterinburg. —*T.D.*

peasant acquaintance of Ermakov's rode up, and it turned out he could see the pit. They had to abandon the task. It was decided to transport the bodies to the deep mine shafts. Since the carts proved flimsy and kept falling apart, the commandant went into town to fetch vehicles (a truck and two passenger cars—one for the Chekists). They were able to set off only at 9 p.m. They crossed the railway line and, half a verst further on, transferred the bodies to the truck. The journey was difficult; they had to pave dangerous stretches with railway sleepers, yet they still got stuck several times. Around 4:30 a.m. on the 19th, the truck became hopelessly stuck; the only remaining option, short of reaching the mines, was to bury or burn the bodies. One comrade undertook to handle the latter task—the commandant forgot his name—but he left without fulfilling the promise.

They intended to burn up Alexei and Alexandra Feodorovna, but by mistake they burned a lady-in-waiting alongside Alexei. Afterward, they buried the remains right there beneath the pyre and rebuilt the fire over them, completely concealing any signs of digging. Meanwhile, a mass grave was dug for the others. By 7 a.m., the pit—about 2-1/2 arshins [6 feet] deep and 3-1/2 arshins [8 feet] square—was ready. The bodies were placed in the pit, and their faces and entire bodies were doused with sulfuric acid—both to render them unrecognizable and to prevent the stench of decomposition, as the pit was shallow. After covering the remains with earth and brushwood, they laid railway ties over the top and drove over them several times; no trace of the pit remained here either. The secret was kept completely intact—this burial place the Whites never discovered.<sup>7</sup>

PASO, fond 221, opis' 2, delo 497, ll. 7–13. Document provided to Ia. M. Yaroslavsky in 1920. Published in P.M. Bykov, *Poslednie dni Romanovykh* [1926, 1930] Moscow: Ural'skii Rabochii, 1990, pp. 105–110.

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<sup>7</sup> Bones of the Tsarist royal family were exhumed after the fall of the USSR, confirmed by DNA testing, and reinterred. —*T.D.*





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